

Jorge Valle – Dec. 17, 2009

# LONG AFTER HE QUIT SKATING, ICE RINK REMAINED HIS HOME

By RODNEY THRASH

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On the ice, Jorge Valle felt free.

He liked the speed, the high-flying jumps, the artistic show numbers.

"That was his love from the very beginning," said his wife, Helga. "He knew that's what he wanted to be. He knew he wanted to be a professional ice skater."

At 19, Jorge turned pro and toured with Holiday on Ice. It was on a stop in Europe that he met Helga, a fellow skater from Vienna. Two months later, he proposed to her.

"Head over foot, I fell for him," Helga said. "He was very gentle, outgoing. No party started 'til he got there."

He wasn't bad on the eyes, either.

"You have no idea how good looking he was," she said. "He was so darn good looking. Like Clark Gable."

Jorge and Helga married in Munich on Dec. 8, 1964. There was no honeymoon. They skated that same night.

"At the end of the show," Helga said, "everybody celebrated with us, and we got a big standing ovation."

Together, they traveled the world with Holiday on Ice, then Ice Capades. Russia. Scandinavia. Israel. Yugoslavia. Czechoslovakia. Turkey. England. Canada. They won a bronze medal at the 1966 World Professional Championships.

They skated professionally until 1972, then settled in Lake Placid, N.Y. - the place where Jorge spent the summers of his youth honing his craft. He trained under Gus Lussi, who groomed Dick Button. Button landed the first double axel in Olympic competition and became the first American to win Olympic gold in figure skating.

This time, Jorge returned to Lake Placid not as the student, but as the teacher. "His second love," Helga said.

She and Jorge trained Elizabeth Manley, silver medalist at the 1988 Winter Olympics; Jill Watson and Peters Oppergard, that year's bronze medalists in pairs figure skating; and Charlene Wong, four-time silver medalist at the Canadian Figure Skating Championships.

The parents of one of their students opened up an ice rink in Clearwater in 1986. They asked Jorge and Helga to move down and teach. They couldn't pass up the opportunity to live in Florida. Jorge was born in Boston, but grew up in Miami. They accepted the offer.

At Sunblades, now Clearwater Ice Arena, they trained amateur and adult figure skaters. Jorge also specialized in skate sharpening.

After Manley won the silver medal at the Calgary Games, she shipped her skates to Jorge. He sharpened the blades in time for her to compete in the World Championships in Budapest. Paul Wylie, a 1992 Olympic silver medalist, also sought his expertise.

"It would make him a little nervous," Helga said. "He provided this extra edge for these highly known amateur skaters to go to the Worlds and the Olympics."

It also made Jorge feel like a professional skater again. "He was part of it," Helga said. "In the background."

Jorge retired in 1999. He continued to sharpen skates, but spent most of the time enjoying his grandchildren. They called him Pop-Pop.

About five years ago, he developed an esophageal disorder that made it hard for him to eat. At the time, he was 196 pounds. Since then, he had shed 100 pounds and had to be fed through a feeding tube.

He died on Dec. 17 at the Woodside Hospice. He was 74.

A part of Jorge remains on the ice. Daughter Vanessa Zamba teaches at the same Clearwater rink as her father.

Helga is still there, too.

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## Biography

Jorge Valle

Born: Jan. 17, 1935. Died: Dec. 17, 2009.

Survivors: Wife Helga Valle; children Vanessa Zamba and Anthony Valle; grandchildren Thomas and Olivia Zamba.